Spirituality without symbols, returning to our roots

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Most of us live a few inches above our lives. It is not that we have abandoned our bodies, but that we hover just slightly above them, suspended in thought, story, aspiration, memory, and fear. Our heads keep singing long after the rest of us has grown quiet. We drift, not because something is wrong with us, but because we were taught to place our spiritual hopes somewhere other than here. We were taught to search upward for salvation, outward for meaning, and inward, ironically, only as far as the concept of "self" could take us. Yet, if we listen closely to the body, if we allow our breath to settle long enough for its wisdom to surface, we find something astonishingly simple. Everything we long for is already happening in the place we have been taught to ignore.

At its origin, spiritual language was meant to point back toward this immediacy. Our symbols were reminders, gentle hints that the world exceeds our descriptions, but symbols have a habit of forgetting their place. Over generations, images of the soul, transcendence, and higher realms ceased to be invitations and became destinations. Our metaphors became blueprints, and for many, spiritual life became an apprenticeship in leaving reality, rather than a practice of inhabiting it.

This is symbolic lock-in, a condition where our symbols cease to guide experience and begin to replace it. When a symbol takes on the weight of the world, we lose access to the world that gave rise to the symbol. We wander in conceptual landscapes, earnest and sincere, but strangely distant from the ground beneath our feet. We meditate to escape the storm of our thoughts, pray to escape the density of our flesh, and seek enlightenment to escape the messiness of being human, but escape is not spirituality. Escape is a refusal of intimacy. Spirituality worth living should bring us closer to life, not further from it.

To understand why symbols drift, we must look at how the mind works. Humans stabilize meaning by repeating patterns, and repeated patterns become habits. Habits crystallize into identity. Identity becomes metaphysics. It is not that anyone intends to mistake the map for

the terrain, it is simply what we, as symbolic creatures, do when frightened, lonely, or seeking certainty. When meaning feels fragile, we cling more tightly to the signposts instead of the landscape. Over time, the signposts become walls, and once walls surround us, we begin to believe we are separate from the world outside.

Our symbol of the self is perhaps the most formidable wall of all. In its earliest use, the self was simply a perspective, a way to distinguish one organism from another. Over centuries it became a metaphysical homunculus, a watchful observer trapped behind our eyes. Spiritual traditions inherited this idea and often doubled down on it, teaching the self as spirit, essence, or immortal core. The effect is an inner exile. One comes to believe that one's true nature lies somewhere above the ribs, behind the face, or somewhere unreachable except through extraordinary effort. The result is a quiet, pervasive sorrow; the sense of being absent from one's own life.

This sorrow does not announce itself dramatically. It appears as subtle resistance to the ordinary; an inability to rest in one's own breath, a sense of being insufficiently alive, or searching for meaning in places the body cannot reach. Many people dedicate years, even decades, to spiritual practices that promise to deliver them from this discomfort. Discomfort, though, is not a failure of spirituality; it is a failure of symbolism. We suffer because we try to live conceptually, while the body insists on living materially. To heal this divide, we must reverse the direction in which we search.

Spirituality traditionally gestures upward toward light, purity, and transcendence. The imagery is beautiful but misleading. When you reach upward, you move away from the ground. When you strive for purity, you declare war on the parts of yourself that are textured, heavy, or unrefined. When you chase transcendence, you implicitly degrade the world you inhabit. When you imagine enlightenment as a state beyond the body, you create a hierarchy in which the body always loses, but the body is not the enemy of spiritual life. It is its birthplace.

A spirituality of descent begins with recognizing that your entire life unfolds in the soft animal chambers of your chest, abdomen, and throat. Notice how your ribs lift without your permission, and your belly loosens on the exhale. Your pulse rises like a quiet drumbeat that

has never missed a measure. These are not mechanical processes; they are the world moving through you. Every breath is the forest entering your lungs. Every heartbeat is an echo of ancient rhythms that predate human language. Every sensation, pleasant or painful, is your organism participating in the unfolding of a world too vast to comprehend. To descend spiritually is not to collapse inward but to sink into the foundation you always had.

Before symbols intervene, you exist in direct reciprocity with the world. Infants know this. Animals know this. Early humans knew this. You breathe in what the world breathes out. You eat what grows from soil that preceded your birth by millions of years. You carry the microbiological imprint of ancestors who survived storms, plagues, migrations, and winters far harsher than your imagination allows. You do not stand apart from the world; you are what the world is doing at this particular location in space and time. Somewhere in adulthood, though, we begin treating ourselves as exceptions.

We imagine trees are rooted and humans are not; our rooting is merely less visible. A tree takes nutrients from the soil; you take nutrients from the tree. A tree exchanges gases through its leaves; you exchange the same gases through your lungs. A tree grows rings; you grow memories. A tree stands still because that is how it survives; you move because motion is how your organism solves the same problem. We are not less rooted than trees; we are simply roots that learned to walk. When you begin to feel this, not as a poetic metaphor but as a lived truth, your sense of spiritual longing changes. You no longer yearn to escape the world; you yearn to participate in it more intimately.

This is where practice comes in. Not practice as a ritual of self-improvement or transcendence, but as a sustained commitment to inhabiting one's life. Begin with descending attention, bring awareness into the weight of your body. Feel how the floor or chair accepts you without hesitation. Notice the subtle oscillations of balance, the micro-adjustments of muscle and tendon. Attention is not a tool of control; it is a form of companionship. In this mode, presence is not something you achieve, it is something you allow.

Let presence open into ecological recognition. Feel how each breath links you to the larger atmospheric body of the planet. Let the wind become not a symbol of freedom but a

sensation against your skin. Let warmth be warmth, not an allegory. Let food be what it actually is, the Earth nourishing itself through you. These recognitions are not mystical; they are sensory. They collapse the illusion of separation without requiring belief.

Cultivate semantic silence. Not the suppression of thought, but the loosening of its authority. Let your inner narrator speak without insisting that its words are real. Notice how the world becomes vivid when you stop demanding that experience be sorted into categories. This silence is not emptiness; it is contact. You do not lose yourself in it; you recover yourself.

In this softened condition, relational presence becomes possible. When you meet another person, you are not meeting their symbols; you are meeting their breath, their warmth, their history of being. Conversation becomes co-regulation, and touch becomes a form of knowing. Even conflict becomes a negotiation between organisms seeking coherence. Spirituality emerges here not through doctrine, but through the astonishing fact that two beings can recognize each other in the midst of their own complexity.

Such spirituality does not eliminate suffering. It simply does not demand that suffering be transformed into something noble or transcendent. Pain becomes part of the texture of being alive, like the roughness of bark or the unpredictability of weather. Joy, too, becomes less fragile; it no longer depends on extraordinary circumstances but arises from the sheer improbability of existence. You breathe, and the world breathes with you. That is enough.

This approach is often misunderstood. Some believe that spirituality grounded in embodiment must reject intellect or culture. On the contrary, intellect flourishes when it rests upon the solid ground of experience. Culture becomes richer when it deepens our belonging to the world rather than distracting us from it. Others fear that spirituality without symbols eliminates mystery, but mystery does not vanish simply because symbols do. Mystery grows. It becomes palpable in every sensation, every encounter, every moment where the world exceeds our understanding. A symbol-less spirituality does not lack symbols, it simply refuses to worship them. Symbols remain tools, beautiful, powerful, and necessary, but transparent. They are windows, not walls.

When spiritual life becomes embodied, something remarkable happens; the distance between you and the world collapses. You begin to sense continuity where you once sensed separation. The wind moves across your skin, and you realize it is not touching you. It is reality touching itself through different forms. The warmth in your chest is not "your" warmth, it is the residue of stars. Your sadness is not a personal flaw, it is a river of history passing through a particular nervous system shaped by forces older than your lineage. This is not metaphor. It is participation.

Spirituality grounded in participation has no interest in rescuing you from your life. It invites you more deeply into your life. It asks you to feel everything, not for the sake of drama, but for the sake of reality. It asks you to trust your body, not because the body is perfect, but because it is honest. It asks you to let go of transcendence, not because transcendence is false, but because it is unnecessary. You do not need to escape the world to find meaning. Meaning is embedded in the fabric of your breathing. The world is not "out there." The world is what you are made of.

When you live this truth, not as a concept, but as a place to stand, spiritual longing changes shape. You stop searching for enlightenment as a state and begin noticing enlightenment as the texture of the warmth of the sun on your neck, the weight of your body on the Earth, the quiet companionship of breath, or the presence of others navigating their own mysteries. Enlightenment ceases to be a destination and becomes a condition of awareness. You realize, finally, that you were never meant to transcend the world. You were meant to join it.

The world does not require your purity or your perfection. It requires your presence. It requires the softening of your symbolic armor so the living world can touch you again. It requires nothing more, and nothing less, than your willingness to feel what is already happening. Spirituality, freed from symbolic lock-in, becomes disarmingly simple. It is the practice of being here, fully, without agenda.

Everything else, every insight, every moment of clarity, every glimpse of the sacred, comes as a consequence of contact. The sacred is not waiting in heaven. It is waiting in the body, in breath, in the ground. It is waiting, all along, for your arrival.

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